Fuse control

He's 33 years old and has been playing the sitar for 29 years already. Today, **Niladri Kumar** is one of the youngest Indian classical musicians.

Where Indian classical music stands today

"Just where it has always been. It's true that today you will see people carrying guitars more often than a sitar, but Indian instruments are far more tedious than western ones. Take drums for example. The sound of your first strike will be 10 per cent of the sound of the greatest drummer in the world. But on the tabla, it takes around six months just to get a sound out of the tabla with your fingertips. And that sound will be only 0.001% of the greatest tabla player! Popular instruments are easy; you're playing a chord on the guitar on the third day of touching the instrument. It's for the masses, Indian classical's not."

Youth connection

It may be his assorted music or simply the age-connect, but it attracts youngsters to Indian classical music concerts. "It is great, as it shows that there exists an interest that needs to be cultured. But I'd like to say this to all young musicians — 'do not promote lifestyles; promote your music!' That is what will gain you respect and love." Unfortunately, he says, youngsters today want to adapt lifestyles rather than the music. "We need more concerts around the city. I will be releasing my new album soon, after which I will organise a series of concerts through the country. I plan to give these concerts an overall experience with an audio as well as a video impact. This will pull in a younger crowd and introduce them to Indian classical music, which after all is where we all come from."

Niladri Kumar connects with the youth

From Sir, with love

Mridangam teacher T S Nandakumar is a favourite with students of all ages

A few perplexing bols from the teacher gets the roomful of students started on their mridangams. 58-year-old V Pillai has been learning for six years and next to him is seated 10-year-old Rajesh who became interested in the instrument at the age of six. They have been learning percussion from their guru Shri T S Nandakumar.

Nandakumar was trained in the Gurukulam tradition in Kerela. "Today the guru-shishya parampara is very difficult to co-exist with the competitive world," says Nandakumar. He believes in making the learning process interesting for his students. Recently he took his students to the temples of Karnataka, where they all performed together. He also takes his students abroad, every time he tours countries. "It is good exposure for them and my sole purpose is to promote my students," says Nandakumar, who teaches in Zurich for a couple of months each year.

His youngest student is three years old and he says that it is the ideal age to begin with an instrument. Sitting in class develops the child's ear for music and that helps in the long run.

T S Nandakumar teaches Carnatic percussion instruments, including the mridangam, ghatam, kanjira, moorsing and the konnakkol. He teaches at the Chembur Fine Arts Society, the Shanmukhananda Sangeet Vidyalay and also tutors individually.

Stacking up a musical legacy

Kishor's antique spool recorder and his desk of work PIC/TIMIRA GUPTA

Kishor Merchant

Listener's take

"There are gharaanas of musicians, but I come from a gharaana of listeners," says Kishor Merchant. "This used to be a palatial bungalow and my grandfather would organise jalsas (sessions) in our own hall. A single musician would perform all through the night up to five-six in the morning. About a hundred people would come to listen. That was the magnitude of classical music back then."

Merchant inherited his grandfather's collection of recordings of great maestros of his era. With the emergence of digital sound processing technologies, Merchant has taken up the task of digitally re-mastering his archival collection. His motive is to preserve the music. "Within 8-10 years I have collected what people have taken a lifetime to collect; it's a single man archive!"

Godfather indeed

"I realised that classical music lacked a Godfather, this art needed to be preserved and I was sure I could be of great help." In around 2003 he started the Musician's Guild, a project born as a service to musicians, to produce CDs. He converts into digital from spools, cassettes and live recordings. An ancient spool recorder sits beside a blinking computer on his desk. He also has a wire recorder, "a device on which recording first began," he claims.

Then and now

He says that there was a time when artists would not want to part with even one minute of their recordings. They were very possessive about them. Ironically today, all an artist wants to do is to publicise his or her recording. But the old artistes soon realised that their progeny were not as deeply involved with the music as them, and started giving Kishor their recordings to preserve. The earliest in his archive is a 1957 live recording of Begum Akhtar!

Kishor is planning to put together a directory that will include contacts of all music concerned individuals and organisations. Contact him on 23635816/ 2364 7476.

Durga Jasraj

Protect, preserve, promote

The IMA (Indian Music Academy) with the support of patrons in the likes of Pt Jasraj, Pt Shivkumar Sharma, Pt Hariprasad Chaurasia and an unending list of maestros, was launched in February last year filling in the major gap required to bring Indian music to the forefront once again.

Spokesperson Durga Jasraj says that the main objective of the foundation is twofold: to promote new talent and to create awareness amongst the youth. The academy is not about teaching but about interaction and creating and reviving interests. Jalsa is a 12-city concert they hold through the country. These concerts have one young maestro along with a legendry artist. Their performance follows an interactive session between the audience and the artists. This new approach broke the barrier between the artist and the audience. "At the end of the year, when we evaluated the concerts, we were pleasantly shocked at the response we have got. 40-45 per cent of the audience consisted of youth aged between 18-30." For their second year, they plan to have 24 city Jalsa and have added other styles of classical music like Sufi and bhajans.

In corporate harmony

Joining hands with corporate organisations was a very smart move. "The economics and feasibility of the project was favourable to them and therefore they did respond positively. When they see results, they will respond. It is only fair," says a confident Durga. They have also received a lot of support from welfare organisations to aid the health conditions of needy musicians.

Just feel the music

She started the academy was because Indian music was being sidelined and it needed to regain its position. Durga says that today's youngsters conveniently claim they don't understand classical music. "Music is one language and it uses the same grammar," she proclaims. "It needs no understanding, its purpose is served as soon as it touches your heart!"

To be a member of IMA for free, simply log on to www.indianmusicacademy.org.in

"40-45 per cent of the audience (at the *Jalsa* concerts) consisted of youth aged between 18-30," — Durga Jasraj